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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies and explores three major factors that affect the career choices of African Americans. First, the future of the American employment market is strongly based in technology, yet approximately two-thirds of the African American population reported their level of education at high school completion and lower. Second, African Americans have remained in careers (education, social work, medicine, law, government, mortuary science, and religion) that directly service their community. These "protected" careers have supported the cultural values of the Afrocentric perspective, which are vital to the maturation of African American youth. Finally, career counselors are encouraged to identify and explore their own prejudicial thinking and discriminatory behaviors as well as offer career guidance to African Americans that incorporates all aspects of the Afrocentric perspective. The identification of these factors is followed with a discussion of the implications of educational level and cultural values for career guidance programs for African Americans. The programs developed to guide African Americans must include techniques that help them advance within the American employment market while taking into consideration the needs of the culture. Counseling approaches that have been found to be effective include methods using social cognitive theory, a reality-behavioral combination theory, and the "I Have a Future" Program that was designed specifically for African American high school students (Contains 16 references.) (GCP)

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Running Head: THE FACTORS AFFECTING THE CAREER CHOICES OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

The Factors Affecting the Career Choices of African Americans and Three Career Counseling Suggestions

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Abstract

Three major factors affect the career choices of African Americans. First, the future of the American employment market is strongly based in technology, yet approximately two-thirds of the African American population, which is projected to increase by 12.9% by 2000, reported their level of education at high school completion and lower. Second, African Americans have remained in careers (education, social work, medicine, law, government, mortuary science, and religion) which directly service their community. These "protected" careers have supported the cultural values, *Nguzo Saba*, of the Afrocentric perspective, which are vital to the maturation of African American youth. Finally, career counselors are encouraged to identify and explore their own prejudicial thinking and discriminatory behaviors as well as offer career guidance to African Americans which incorporates all aspects of the Afrocentric perspective.

The educational level and cultural values of African Americans imply certain implications which must be included in career guidance programs for African Americans. The programs developed to guide African Americans must include techniques that help them advance within the American employment market while taking into consideration the needs of the culture. Counseling approaches that have been found to be effective include methods using social cognitive theory, a reality-behavioral combination theory, and the *I Have A Future* Program that was designed specifically for African American high schoolers.

The Factors Affecting the Career Choices of African Americans and Three Career Counseling Suggestions

Career counselors are challenged when offering guidance to African Americans. This special group of Americans faces the formidable task of finding a career, as opposed to a job, in our Eurocentric society. The ensuing information will reveal (a) the projected population, educational level, and employment statistics of African Americans relevant to their career choices within the United States; (b) why and how African Americans have traditionally chosen certain careers; (c) Afrocentric issues and principles that counselors need to consider when offering career guidance; and (d) various suggestions and techniques for counseling African Americans in search of career choices.

Statistics: Present and Future

The U.S. Bureau of the Census reported that in 1995 the African American population totaled 33,141,000 and is projected to increase to 35,454,000 by 2000, an increase of 12.9%. The greatest growth in the African American race will be seen in the southern region of the United States (53%). The other regions show lower projected increases. The northeast and the midwest regions have an expected rise of approximately 19% each, and the western region is expected to increase by 10% (Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1996 [116th ed.], 1996).

African Americans experienced the highest unemployment rate over other ethnic groups. The 1996 U.S. Census also stated that 10.4% of African Americans and 9.3% of Hispanics were unemployed in 1995, while only 4.9% of our country's white population was without work. The unemployment figures for the African American population could be due in part to their recorded educational attainment where a large majority (62.4%) had a maximum of a high school diploma (see Table 1), thus, decreasing the chances of the average African American from benefiting from career advancement (Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1996 [116th ed.], 1996).

Trends in the American employment market lean toward a need for more education, especially technologically-based learning (Herr & Cramer, 1996). Herr and Cramer pointed out that the future strongly leans toward automation and cybernetics which causes job displacement to

occur. This shift has already been experienced in the American society. The number of people who are engaged in agriculture and production of other similar goods (e.g., clothing manufacturing) has substantially decreased (i.e., by almost 50%) within the latter half of this century. Herr and Cramer did note that this shift toward technology would affect other areas of the employment market as well. For example, having more people enrolled in college to increase their level of education would cause a need for more post-secondary educators (and subsequently departmental staff). And, an increase in health-care providers (i.e., mental, physical, and spiritual) would be needed to assist in furthering progress in the area of social technology (e.g., maternity or paternity benefits, child care, part-time or flex-time, occupational stress, job satisfaction) (Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1996 [116th ed.], 1996). This shift is relevant to career counselors because the 1996 U.S. Census also reported that 15.7 million African Americans are projected to be a part of the United States civilian labor force by 2000, which is almost 7% of the projected American population. The average lifestyle of an African American will not "feel" much improved if his or her educational level does not expand along with the leanings of the employment market.

Table 1

1996 Reported Educational Attainment of African Americans

Population (%)	Level Attained
26.2	no high school diploma
36.2	high school diploma
18.0	some college
6.3	associate degree
9.6	bachelor degree
3.7	advanced degree

Note. From Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1996, (116th ed.), (Table 243, p. 160), 1996, Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of the Census.

Brown, Minor, and Jepsen (1991) presented a report on the results from a telephone survey done through the National Career Development Association (NCDA) in 1987. A sample of 1,350 African American adults were asked questions "to determine perceptions of their own career planning processes and workplaces" (p. 5). The results supported the need for career counselors to reach out to the African American population. African Americans surveyed reported that they need assistance attaining work (15%), that the jobs they do have are due to availability (27%), and that these jobs use their skills appropriately (60%). Half of them stated that they expect to stay with their present employer where they experience little or no job stress, although an increase in pay would be a strong incentive for a change in position (56%). College career information services were used by 19% of the African Americans surveyed, and 17% believed that the usefulness of available job information needed to be upgraded. However, 79% of those surveyed stated that if they were to foresee a career move they would still use the services offered via career guidance.

For the past three decades, African Americans have remained in "protected" careers (Evans & Herr, 1991) that directly service their community. The traditional careers in education, social work, medicine, law, government, mortuary science, and religion do not appear to reflect on individuals' self-concepts (Evans & Herr, 1994). Factors that affect the choice of their careers are (a)willingness to relocate, (b) Affirmative Action backlash, (c) ability to obtain post-secondary education in order to gain a competitive edge in the work force, (d) the impact of technology, and (e) downsizing by employers (Hayes, 1996). Hayes suggested that flexibility, acceptance, and upgrading and continued education, respectively, may assist in combating the low employment rate among African Americans and encourage new career opportunities.

The main purpose of an African American's choice of occupation is to give back to his or her culture. The specifics regarding this culture, its Afrocentric nature, are what make it unique. Kimbrough and Salomone (1993) stated:

> If a person in the Black community has a steady job, provides for family, supports the church, and is trying to assist the group, then he or she is accorded high social status and rank in that community. The job may be considered menial by mainstream society

> standards (e.g., cleaner, barber, beautician) but the person is considered successful in the Black community. (p. 267)

Each African American community is subdivided and distinct according to its values, norms, traditions, and lifestyles. The factors involved include geographic location (rural or urban), language usage (educated or not), differences in political and economic interests, and religious affiliation (gospel or structured) (Kimbrough & Salomone, 1993).

In his article, D'Andrea (1995) stated that the life principles of the African American culture, or the *Nguzo Saba*, are the "cultural values that reinforce the healthy development of the African American youth" (p. 62). The *Nguzo Saba* depict the Afrocentric perspective well. Kunjufu (1986) described the values that are inherent in these seven life principles:

> 1. *Umoja*, or Unity: To strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation and race.
>
> 2. *Kujichagulia*, or Self-determination: To define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves and speak for ourselves instead of being defined, named, created for and spoken for by others.
>
> 3. *Ujima*, or Collective work and Responsibility: To build and maintain our community together and make our sister's and brother's problems our problems, and to solve them together.
>
> 4. *Ujamaa*, or Cooperative Economics: To build and maintain our own stores, shops and other business, and to profit from them together.
>
> 5. *Nia*, or Purpose: To make our collective vocation the building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness.
>
> 6. *Kuumba*, or Creativity: To do always as much as we can, in the way we can, in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.
>
> 7. *Imani*, or Faith: To believe with all our heart in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders and the righteousness and victory of our struggle. (p. 23)

Kunjufu believed that if African American adults embraced and modeled these values then African American youths would make the *Nguzo Saba* a genuine part of their core belief system.

Career counselors' challenge becomes clearer and further defined when they consider the present and projected statistics, the NCDA Survey results, and the causes and effects regarding the Afrocentric viewpoint. The average African American is faced with a formidable task, and he or she has requested (as noted by the NCDA Survey) the guidance offered by professional career counselors.

Counseling: Issues and Techniques

The Afrocentric issues that have affected African Americans in regard to finding work and planning a career are varied in direction. Evans and Herr's (1991) research indicated that African Americans' self-esteem and self-confidence are lower than that of other races. African Americans are also confronted with the racist attitudes and sexist behaviors (especially for African American women) of their peers in the workplace (Brown, Minor, & Jepsen, 1991). Issues such as finding and affording child care plague this community as well. Extended family support is highly unlikely because each available family member must work in order for the family to survive Lastly, counselors are strongly encouraged to consider their values and conceptions regarding their own prejudice thinking and discriminatory behaviors, and they are increasingly supported to update their cultural knowledge for guiding ethnic groups different than their own (Kimbrough & Salomone, 1993; Luzzo, 1992; Todisco & Salamone, 1991).

The unique issues which face the African American population, coupled with the seven life principles mentioned earlier, create a new arena for career counselors. Generally, African Americans want work that will award them the social status and rank they desire and will assist them in reciprocating to the community the loyalty it demands. Typically, the career counselor hopes to also guide clients toward a healthier, happier, and more rewarding lifestyle. Kimbrough and Salomone (1993) offered a few suggestions regarding this matter. As with all clients seeking career guidance, instruction and fine-tuning interviewing skills is truly relevant. Second, counselors support clients in enriching their own conceptions of the Afrocentic world view. This is

meant to educate the client in order to be better able to differentiate between Afrocentric and Eurocentric attitudes and behaviors in the workplace. Also, Kimbrough and Salomone suggested that when working with African Americans from rural communities special attention should be given to incorporating inclusive family counseling which is defined as including the client's immediate and extended family as well as his or her kindred community (e.g., neighbors and respected elders). Evans and Herr (1994) suggested that addressing problems related to how African Americans *perceive* discrimination and the resulting self-imposed boundaries have shown to affect their behaviors while at work and their choice in career.

Three specific counseling approaches have received much attention. Hackett and Byars's (1996) approach is based on research and conceptual literature regarding social cognitive career theory. It blends Bandura's (1996) four major sources of efficacy information, (a) performance accomplishments, (b) vicarious learning, (c) physiological and affective states, and (d) verbal persuasion with cognitive theory. These four sources interact complexly and reciprocally, depending on the nature of the interaction. Briefly, Hackett and Byars noted that (a) learning experiences (academic and employment), (b) realistic and appropriate models (based on race, age, social background, and coping response style), (c) anxiety levels, and (d) all aspects of communication style (e.g., blatant discouragement, non-acknowledgment of positive performance, or overt encouragement and praise) can enhance or diminish career-related efficacy, respectively. It is the counselor's role to identify and explore the client's (a) sources of low efficacy and outcome expectancy, (b) childhood opportunities for learning how to relate to the outside (white) world, (c) confidence regarding coping with life's stressors, or coping efficacy, and (d) internalized messages and self-talk style. Hackett and Byars listed various intervention areas that social cognitive career counselors should incorporate when encouraging African American women toward a more positive career-related efficacy. The intervention areas include (a) identifying and helping the women cope with subtle and blatant racism and sexism; (b) assessing and exploring ethnic identity development, interests, and goal setting behaviors; (c) teaching anxiety and stress management skills; and (d) developing the necessary career-related skills along with "strong, realistic, and positive career self-

efficacy beliefs" (p. 337). Hackett and Byars emphasized that above all career counselors must keep in mind that a strong career self-efficacy accompanied by social support, mentoring, networking, and collective action are extremely important tools toward empowering African American women. Therefore, Hackett and Byars's social cognitive theory is useful in developing a healthy career self-efficacy and an effective coping efficacy, especially regarding racism and discrimination.

Wynne (1987), through his extensive professional experience, has found support for using a combination of reality, behavioral, and systemic therapies when offering counseling to African Americans. He stated that this combination works best because of the ethnic characteristics inherent in this culture. The characteristics he refers to are a necessary part of the counseling relationship. They include the client (a) being tangibly-oriented or concrete, (b) having a preference for direct communication (i.e., the counselor asks direct, concrete questions), (c) being upfront and honest, (d) preferring short-term techniques (e.g., problem-solving), (e) perceiving the problem externally, and (f) attending counseling as a last resort (i.e., the counselor is an advise-giver).

By far, D'Andrea (1995) has described the most extensive approach. The *I Have A Future* (IHAF) Program is a multiservice career development project that was designed by Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee specifically to encourage, support, and broaden the career choices for African American adolescents in the Nashville area. This comprehensive, community-based program is lead by counselors who have completed a 16-hour training course which prepares them to apply the three areas of intervention with African American youths. The first area focuses on the clients. They are enrolled in a career development training course that (a) recruits and directly involves positive, successful role models from within the community (i.e., Bandura's modeling that is based on race, age, social background), (b) encourages critical thinking and career problem-solving through group discussions (e.g., how to work and advance one's educational status, how to resolve peer and supervisory conflicts, how to adapt to sudden and necessary career change), and (c) shows the solutions derived during group discussions by way of traditional job interview role-playing exercises. The second area of intervention involves input from a

multicultural aspect. Support is obtained from the community by way of secured employment upon satisfactory completion of the IHAF Program. It also involves individual and group counseling centered around the Afrocentric perspective of the *Nguzo Saba* (Kunjufu, 1986) for the adolescents in the program. The third area of intervention uses indirect counseling services to promote systematic change on a broader level. The IHAF Program counselors attempt to make constructive systemic changes in the youths' neighborhoods by consulting with church leaders, coordinating public events, securing job placements (i.e., regarding career development), and networking. The IHAF counselors also lobby on local, state, and national levels in the hope of having a positive impact on the welfare of African American youth. The IHAF Program is specifically designed to guide adolescents in these areas and in career decision-making while incorporating the seven life principles as a part of their career development.

These three counseling approaches are unique from other career counseling methods in that they all focus on the values, traditions, and beliefs of the African American culture. Sue, Ivey, and Pedersen (1996) have advocated how important it is for all mental health providers and educators to be fully aware of their clients' values, assumptions, beliefs, and practices so that communication and career guidance can be more effective. In order to genuinely accomplish this unconditional acceptance of clients' lifestyles, counselors are also challenged to confront their demons regarding prejudice and discrimination (Kimbrough & Salomone, 1993).

Conclusion

African Americans in our country have requested assistance (as revealed via the 1996 U.S. Census) with career planning. Projected statistics indicated that this population is in need of that assistance, or their unemployment rate will continue to rise into the 21st century. The South is a strong cultural variable because of its high expected influx of African Americans. Inadequate preparation and lack of assistance also keep African Americans from making strong school-to-work transitions and from obtaining opportunities for advancement (Worthington & Juntunen, 1997). Career counselors of the future must be able to incorporate the many aspects inherent in the

African American culture. Implications of this literature review revealed that career counselors need to be open-minded to and focused on all aspects of the client he or she is counseling.

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